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ABSTRACT

Institutional self-study is an appropriate method for determining quality and demonstrating accountability which can lead to academic and administrative excellence. With a trend toward state and federal government involvement in higher education, colleges will do well to conduct internal program assessments in order to maintain control. A self-study should include such factors as program goals and organization, available fiscal resources and facilities, curriculum offerings, faculty resources, student characteristics, and current issues. Appropriate quantitative data should be included, and outside guidance from impartial consultants should be obtained. (LB)

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84-1

ERIC DIGEST

SELF-STUDY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE PATH TO EXCELLENCE*

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*A digest of "The Path of Excellence: Quality Assurance in Higher Education," by Lawrence R. Marcus, Anita O. Leone, and Edward D. Goldberg (ED 227 800)

As public revenues have become tighter, legislators and government executives have called for more accountability of tax-supported organizations, including public colleges. The necessity for proof that public funds are being expended in a cost-effective manner, to a good end, and with a demonstrable benefit to those being served escaped higher education for many years; that appears no longer to be the case. Institutional self-study is an appropriate method for determining quality and demonstrating accountability, which can lead to academic and administrative excellence.

WHAT IS THE TREND FOR GOVERNMENT REGULATIONS?

Regulation follows public money. Thus it is no wonder that state and federal government regulations have reached higher education. Until recently, state and federal oversight was limited to institutional licensure and to state-level planning and coordination, including the approval of new degree programs. Now, such efforts as state review of existing academic programs are becoming more common. Even more indicative of greater government involvement is the fact that at least 17 states have provided their higher education agency with the responsibility and general powers to accredit institutions and programs within their jurisdiction.

WHAT ROLE DOES THE ACCREDITATION PLAY?

Government activity in academic matters is controversial. Increased quality review activity by the states is supported by some, but opposed by college and university leaders and accreditation groups. The federal government traditionally has relied on accreditation as the basis for eligibility for federal funds, and the states have relied on it as evidence of quality for the maintenance of a license to operate as well as for continued eligibility for state funds.

Accreditation as an indicator of quality has come under strong criticism, partially because accrediting bodies assess an institution's quality according to the institution's own mission and self-definition. Critics point out problems:

- the accreditation process has become ingrown and the denial of accreditation is virtually impossible;

HE 020 640

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- the period of accreditation granted is lengthy (often 10 years) and the secrecy surrounding the report of the review team is suspect;
- accrediting associations do not monitor or enforce standards, nor are they willing to make public those standards that an institution does not meet (Trivett, 1976).

Whether accreditation continues to serve as the basis for eligibiity for public funds remains to be seen. Some states already have become more activist in attempting to ascertain that institutions are providing a quality education. Some observers think the greatest safeguard against an increased state role is for colleges themselves to strengthen their own evaluation activities.

HOW CAN INSTITUTIONS ASSURE QUALITY CONTROL?

Assessment of the quality of educational programs is not easy since quality "is an elusive concept" (Scott 1981). Nevertheless, a comprehensive, systematic appraisal effort can assist the faculty and the institution's leadership in making judgments regarding academic strength. A focus both on the program's process and outcome is needed.

The evaluation needs (1) to be comprehensive and (2) to have broad participation. Chaired by a person of recognized stature, a review committee should include senior and junior program faculty, academic administrators, and faculty from other departments. A subcommittee of program faculty should prepare a self-study to serve as the foundation for the program review.

WHAT IS NEEDED IN A SELF STUDY?

At a minimum, the self-study should include:

- the goals of the program (within the context of the broader institutional mission);
- the program's organization--internal processes and personnel practices;
- available fiscal resources and facilities--laboratories and library holdings;
- the curriculum--course sequencing, comparison to professional standards, and relevance to student goals;
- the faculty--demographic data, workload requirements, specializations, and scholarly activity;
- the students--entry and exit characteristics, class sizes, graduation rates, and placement; and
- current issues--perceived weaknesses and future plans.

Appropriate quantitative data should be included:

- number of graduates,
- attrition rates,
- enrollments,
- student demand trends,
- volumes in the library,
- faculty publications,
- test scores,
- success of graduates,
- course costs, and
- cost-effectiveness data.

However, an overreliance on numerical factors--such as average cost per credit hour or per graduate--should be discouraged. The assessment of program goals, student learning, faculty performance, and curriculum must have a qualitative bent. For example, an examination of faculty quality should move beyond background characteristics and workload statistics to a focus on such factors as the quality of teaching, ability to retain students, professional activities, research and publication, and the vitality of the department.

IS OUTSIDE GUIDANCE USEFUL?

Once completed, the self-study should be reviewed by an impartial, external consultant selected for his/her professional standing and knowledge about the issues and trends in the particular field of study. The consultant should also visit the campus to discuss the issues with program and other faculty, students, and administrators. The result should be a report that comments on whether the stated goals and accomplishments make sense. Most important is the consultant's judgment regarding the candor of the self-study, the program's ability to be self-critical, and its willingness to act upon identified weaknesses. Institutions should circulate broadly the consultant's report or candid summary of it. The University of Chicago's practice (Miller 1979) can serve as a model.

HOW CAN INSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENT BE DEMONSTRATED?

Comprehensive, forthright, decision-oriented program evaluations, made public, are the best way for an institution to demonstrate that:

- it is concerned about quality,
- its efforts are worthy of continued public funding, and
- it does not need the on-campus presence of state evaluators in order to be accountable and responsive to public concerns.

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